

The Reformism Inherent to Statism

Autonomous Politics against Fascism

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As oppressive conditions internal to the u.s. settler empire are clarified through the (re)consolidation of amerikan fascism, the prospect of revolution feels strikingly urgent and yet ever more remote. So much of our “past” seems to be reappearing as our present, but our moment is not the same and the state of our struggles reflect this fact.

Many purported “revolutionary outlooks” are taking on reformist ends and proposing reformist means. (Neo)liberalism is shaping the political projects of most progressive forces in the imperial core. Much of ‘the left’ continues holding to statist theories and methodologies of struggle despite these proving incapable of meeting the challenges defining our political epoch in any revolutionary way, especially on u.s. occupied Turtle Island.

Our stands against fascism, if they are to be effective, must come through our liberation struggles. And our liberation struggles, if we are to win, must move beyond statism.

Here, we will explore: 1) how the State, repression, and reformism interconnect as counter-revolutionary forces and fuel fascism; 2) why government, statism, and the politics of appeal must be rejected to struggle toward liberation; and 3) the politics of autonomy as necessarily revolutionary, and expropriation as an alternative strategic logic for winning concessions from the government.

Inshallah, i hope you derive something beneficial from this essay and engage the works i reference throughout further.

The State, Repression, & Reformism

There’s a pervasive notion across progressive spaces, especially in the u.s. settler empire, that we should quell the ire of the State to “win favorable policy changes (concessions) until conditions are right for revolution”. That unless a movement is big enough, the people angry enough, the cause popular enough, we do what’s necessary to stave off the State’s mobilization against us, to keep its repression confined and not widely felt.

So when radicals within these movements and spaces say, as the writers of Black Armed Joy do, “We seek unmediated and uncompromising conflict with the State and Capital... Living by principle means we dismantle systems (as best we can) in this world at this moment.”, they are marginalized, framed as undisciplined and impractical for “inviting repression”.

There are crucial things to consider around repression when acting on our conditions. Protecting those in and across our communities who are most vulnerable when it heightens and as it spreads is necessary. Organizing to effectively counteract it is necessary and a task in itself. But we should not confuse giving these things proper attention and effort with the impulse to avoid or stave off repression in itself, whether all-together or until some arbitrary “revolutionary moment”.

Jonathan Jackson illustrates the significance of repression in *Blood In My Eye*. Discussing the aftermath of a 1969 shootout around the Black Panther Party LA headquarters, he says:

Have you grasped the significance of the backlash? It has stung the fascist. The people are in foment, all of them, of all persuasion. They don’t dig midnight or dawn raiding parties, bullets with steel jackets, cowardly pigs perched upon their roofs, the same gases manufactured for use against the Vietnamese Liberators blowing back into their faces: Repression. Do you see the effect it has on the uncommitted? Comrade, Repression exposes. By drawing out the violence of the beast, the vanguard

party is demonstrating for the world to examine just what terms [capitalist, fascist, rule] is predicated on — their power to organize violence, our acquiesce. (Jackson, p.23)

Repression is a core part of revolution. The drive to avoid it, in many cases, roots to reformism.

Reformists, progressive and conservative alike, derive no benefit from ongoing direct conflict with the State and ruling classes, nor the wide-spread repression accompanying it, when a path to negotiation is available. In fact, even when no such path exists, the benefit of this type of conflict and its accompanying repression is still negligible; because it indicates some strategic failing on the part of the reform movement or the reformist currents in a revolutionary movement.

In the former case, where a path to negotiation is available, the State functions to orient the movement toward capture upfront. It sets the terms: 1) upon which the movement's 'cause' is defined — i.e. what and how demands are developed and put forth; and 2) under which the movement's 'struggle' is waged — i.e. what and how strategies are conceived and implemented.

This setting of terms determines the means, methods, and terrains in/through which antagonism will be allowed to popularly surface as tension between the movement and government. If the movement succeeds on the basis of these terms, its demands and strategy were deemed legitimate in the eyes of the State. An agreement can be made. The surfaced tension can be resolved through government policy. The antagonism persists through reconciliation. Hierarchical power is upheld and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order is reformed, reproduced through collaboration. The State incorporates the movement into itself, suppressing the parts it can't.

In the latter case, where no path to negotiation is available, the same setting of terms occurs by the State. The State attempts to orient the movement toward capture in a similar way; determining the means, methods, and terrains in/through which antagonism may popularly surface as tension between the movement and government.

Here however, the movement's demands, strategies, or both cannot be deemed legitimate in the eyes of the State. No agreement can be made. The surfaced tension cannot be resolved through government policy. The antagonism persists without reconciliation. Hierarchical power is upheld and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order is reformed, reproduced in conflict. The State attempts to metabolize reactionary elements in the movement and incorporate reformist ones, while suppressing the movement as a whole. This is repression.

Repression met with acquiesce is stabilizing.

Repression met with resistance is rupturing.

Exposing its basis (organized violence), the State (re)sets the terms upon which the 'cause' is defined and under which the 'struggle' is waged while and by (re)asserting the terms of order. The surfaced tension expands in reach and increases in intensity. Police break-ins, military patrolling, checkpoints, heightened surveillance, even more intentional resource deprivation, abductions, exiles, assassinations; the imposition of law and order becomes more widely felt and apparent.

This process (repression) clarifies the antagonism, popularly surfaced as a tension between movement and government, to be one between the people and State — especially for those who soberly examine, or act outside, law and order. But this clarification is only that, clarifying. Repression met with acquiesce is stabilizing. Repression met with resistance is rupturing.

Reformism as a logic and approach to struggle presupposes, whether in part or in whole, the terms of order. Reform projects aim at or center on recognition and legitimacy — negotiation

and agreement, reconciliation and collaboration — within these terms of order (through States). This is why reformists essentialize the State in how they define their ‘cause’, in how they plan and wage their ‘struggle’. Their demands are conceived, their strategies are developed, and their movements are oriented, toward State capture. Their projects, then, are made instrumental in upholding hierarchical power and reproducing the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order.

Repression clarifies the antagonism between the people and State because it surfaces the State’s function of suppression, exposing its basis and what its violence ultimately serves. Reformism necessitates acquiesce. It seeks to resolve surfaced tensions, blurring this persisting antagonism. It is a stabilizing force in the process of repression.

Our posture toward repression — whether we meet it with acquiesce or resistance, how we strategize around it and struggle through it — is deeply intertwined with our posture toward States. This is why reformists, conservative and progressive alike, affirm the sanctity of ‘law and order’ — emphasizing its “necessity” or “utility” in their advocacy — especially in response to repression.

Reformists’ political posture toward the prospect of State repression today mirrors that of progressives who argued against an embrace of revolutionary dual power and guerrilla strategies, in favor of electoralism and the like, during the Black Power era. What George Jackson says of the latter applies equally to the former:

The warnings that “our thrusts toward self-determination will bring on fascism” are irresponsible — or better, unrealistic. The fascists already have power. The point is that some way must be found to expose them and combat them... We are faced with two choices: to continue as we have done for forty years fanning our pamphlets against the hurricane, or starting to build a new revolutionary culture that we will be able to turn on the old culture. Collectively we have that choice; the Black Colony as it sits out here alone has no such choice. (Jackson, p.72)

The terms of order mandate the destruction of Black and Indigenous life and lifeways. The control and confinement of our bodies; the surveillance of our relationships; the persecution of our expanses as transgressions. The theft and genocide of our people; the rape and pillage of our lands; the destitution of our communities and subordination of our nations. All this to uphold a world defined by and made for the rule of (white) Man.

Fascism speaks the language of reform and wars against the ungovernable to survive. The State serves as its strong arm and mouthpiece. Thus, there is clear reason behind fascism cursing the gender outlaw, the maroon, the anarchist/ic. For the State’s ire being persistently directed at us, especially in the belly of settler empire.

Hierarchical power and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order can never reform to incorporate our political projects, nor our existence. And still, we can never be fully repressed. We are a thorn in the side of fascism no State can remove, consume, or contain — and we must be governed nonetheless. So we are demonized, policed, attacked, held captive, by the State — in fascism’s unending pursuit of its own reproduction.

Reformists enlist themselves in State campaigns to (re)assert the terms of order. In so doing, they clarify themselves. There is no wonder they think we need to quell the ire of the State and stave off its mobilization of violence against us. Theirs is a struggle for stability. Ours cannot be.

Government, Statism, & the Politics of Appeal

To be precise with our terms: A 'State' is a political apparatus that maintains order — i.e. social-political-economic arrangements which reproduce the position and power of the ruling classes in a society — through "legitimate" violence and coercion, across delineated territories. States function internally to suppress and absorb people's on the ground movement; to exert authority over how people within their jurisdiction organize and relate with each other, domestically and abroad. 'Statism' is a liberal philosophy that conceptualizes States as essential for the societal scale organization and protection of a nation/people.

That reformist praxes necessarily flow from statist presuppositions is evident in light of this all. Still, we should elaborate further to make this more clear. A general principle concerning government policy Modibo Kadalie presents in Pan-African Social Ecology is illuminating here:

The policy of a government is epiphenomenal, meaning it is always a response to something. When I say epiphenomenal, I mean something that appears to be real but is not real in the form that it appears. For instance, the moonlight does not come from the moon, but it's the sunlight reflected by the moon. So too are these policies really reflections of social movement. (Kadalie, p.62)

We should sit with this, because its very important.

By the time a local government deliberates on a change in housing policy to resolve an issue raised by residents, hundreds of those very residents have already done the work of deliberating, developing, and implementing multiple context-specific resolutions to that very issue. The legislation being considered is itself often the product of these residents' collective efforts. If the policy wasn't drafted by them originally as a proposal, the official who drafted it did so because of direct pressure from the residents. Residents whose demands left little thinking to be done on the official's part, and whose persistence in the face of disregard, threats, or both left no choice for the government but to do **something**.

Policies do not initiate anything. The government sees some kind of need, which it defines based on its own interests, and then institutes whatever program, whatever policy — war policy or welfare policy — it needs to stay afloat. (Kadalie, p.62–63)

Once some legislation is passed and the new government policy publicized, the government is credited with resolving the residents' issues, with stewarding 'progress' on housing. The residents, who (resource deprived) organized themselves to handle their own affairs effectively for months or years while also organizing themselves to make the government act in their interests, are presumed the benefactors.

As Lucy Parsons explains in *The Principles of Anarchism*, "When the prison, stake or scaffold can no longer silence the voice of the protesting minority, progress moves on a step, but not until then."

When the terrain shifts beneath an authority's weight, the authority scurries to press down on it again. The grassroots movement, which induced the authority's scramble, gets called 'disorder' by that authority. The grassroots being held beneath its weight, 'order'. And the authority's (forced) movement projected out as 'progress' secured through its suppression or absorption of the grassroots, and codified in a reproduced 'order'.

States respond internally to conditions on the ground, to absorb movements they cannot outright suppress and suppress elements of movements they cannot absorb in whole. Government is the organ in/through which State capacities and mechanisms of absorption and suppression are concentrated, legitimized, re-configured. Government policy, law, is an exertion of these capacities.

When the objective we take on is moving a government to act according to our interests, the State becomes what we conceive our interests through. What we analyze our power and other capacities through. What we move to express our will through. We take government to be the vehicle through which progress is made. “Favorable” government policy, “more humane” law, becomes our measure of success. Reform becomes our end. Appeal becomes our means. States are essentialized in our politics.

We see then, why Kadalie’s point about government policy being epiphenomenal is so important. “Governments never lead; they follow progress,” as Parsons put it. Understanding this fact, really turning it over in our minds and analyzing the world through it, subverts false notions of the State’s necessity and allows us to **see ourselves** properly.

The magic hands are, without question, the hands of the people. The imagination, ingenuity, and initiative expressed as drives toward progress; those qualities necessary to transform that drive into material change, to even realize a condition of liberation; these already exist in us and are displayed in our organic movement regularly. Any State’s claim to having “progressed” results from its government effectively co-opting our capacities while (re)asserting the terms of order — reconstituting itself at the expense of our struggles to live beyond the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order it imposes and upkeeps.

The problem of embracing a politics of appeal is striking when we consider this all seriously, at least for those of us invested in liberation struggle. George Jackson clarifies the stakes of such an embrace, specifically at points of crisis:

The mass psycho-social national cohesiveness [of the u.s.a.] has trembled on the brink of disruption and disintegration repeatedly over the last fifty years, threatening to fly apart from its own concentric inner dynamics. But at each crisis it was allowed to reform itself; with each reform, revolution became more remote... We will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class. But if one were forced for the sake of clarity to define it in a word simple enough for all to understand, that word would be “reform.” (Jackson, p.118)

The politics of appeal are a pervasive means by which fascism sits us down to talk, and molds our movements into forms compatible with its continued existence. This is the slick game that defines (neo)liberalism and through which political actors signal their investment in hierarchical power and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order, both domestically and internationally.

Any politics of appeal are a politics of reform, with statist presuppositions. A politics where the magic power of **these hands** (our hands, the people’s hands) is projected onto, placed into, exerted through, States. Where States are placed at the center of our causes and struggles — their eyes becoming ours, our hands becoming theirs. Where our efforts merge with States in struggles for recognition under their law, in negotiations of how they will (re)assert the terms of order.

Where liberation is our end, the terms of order must be rejected in our politics and States must be de-essentialized in our praxes. This is true concerning our relationship to government and its policy just as much as anything else.

Consider another point from George Jackson:

The enemy culture, the established government, exists first of all because of its ability to govern, to maintain enough order to ensure that a cycle of sorts exists between the various levels and elements of the society. “Law and Order” is their objective. Ours is “Perfect Disorder.” (Jackson, p.59)

Jackson states this explaining the value of ‘urban people’s guerrilla warfare’ for revolutionary struggle in the u.s. settler empire, but political and military strategy are inseparable and necessarily reinforce each other on his analysis. This ‘perfect disorder’ he mentions is not something materialized through armed struggle alone, disconnected from political projects or pursued separate from people’s movements.

Government failure is like a heart attack for States and ruling classes. It’s a disorderly situation where rupture makes projects otherwise within a State’s capacity to undermine impossible for the State to do anything about. Perfect disorder can be understood as government failure manufactured **in and through** the process of liberation struggle. In this way, perfect disorder signals the deterioration of hierarchical power and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order in a given place at a particular time.

Jackson elaborates further:

Our aim is to stop the life cycle of the enemy culture and replace it with our own revolutionary culture. This can be done only by creating perfect disorder within the cycle of the enemy culture’s life process and leaving a power vacuum to be filled by our building revolutionary culture. (Jackson, p.59)

Those who work to create perfect disorder allow the prospect of government failure, of State collapse, to orient all their efforts in struggle — including those that result in government policy changes. This radically breaks from common (reformist) approaches to ‘winning concessions’, even among “revolutionary” segments of the left.

Expropriation & the Politics of Autonomy

Efforts that win concessions from a government are often understood as being **for** policy changes. On this basis, effective movements are taken to center on campaigns with concrete demands we push a government (or some other authority) to meet. The process of organizing here is one where we go to the community, identify issues, bring folks together to cut these issues down and develop clear demands, then mobilize people and resources toward getting those demands met by the government.

In this process, infrastructure is necessarily built up. Mutual aid and support networks fill in gaps and protect more vulnerable community members throughout the campaign. Committees pop up to coordinate around campaign related tasks, response to repression (in its various forms), and so on. Inter-community networks develop as mobilization extends beyond the neighborhood

the issues were first identified in. All these things fuel and bolster the campaign, and hopefully culminate in a win; meaning we effectively confront the target, are recognized, and negotiate for a policy change that will serve the community.

This is a proven organizing model. However, it is nested in a politics of appeal, which reifies government power even through our consolidation and assertion of our own, making our objective in practice a new ‘law and order’ rather than perfect disorder.

Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin unsettles this in Anarchism and the Black Revolution. Speaking toward the need for a ‘new Black protest movement’, he explains:

It must be a movement that, although it seeks to expropriate government money for projects that benefit the people, does not recognize any progressive role for the government in the lives of the people. The government will not free us, and is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. (Ervin, 1993)

Ervin’s outlook nests efforts that produce policy change within a politics of autonomy (Black autonomous politics). A politics which seeks to read power only through the eyes of the people and to exert power only through the hands of the people. A politics where we determine the means, methods, and terrain in/through which tension surfaces at each turn; building autonomous infrastructures and organizing ourselves to further materialize our self-determination in and across our communities, outside and against the State.

This allows us to think about winning concessions from a different angle. One that recognizes our movements and broader struggle as being in ongoing conflict with the State — insofar as those movements are autonomous and that struggle is toward liberation. Hence, the word of note: Expropriate.

Expropriation is a process of taking privately owned resources from one and re-appropriating those resources into the people’s hands. The legally recognized version of this is what governments do when they put control over a private entity’s property into the hands of the State, calling the State “the public” and claiming to act in “public interest”; but this is only a re-articulation of private ownership, an economic reform by the government, the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order reproducing itself. This cannot be understood as expropriation within a politics of autonomy.

The State, no matter what it calls itself, is not the people. It cannot appropriate resources into the hands of the people without turning our hands into its — i.e. without determining for us how those resources must be used. Autonomous movements seek to expropriate resources from the government and ruling classes strictly for the sake of increasing our communities’ capacity to self-determine, and to reject the terms of order in doing so. This requires alegalist (or blaquillegalist) approaches to strategizing, and a conscious use of tactics that can resist State capture and repression.

This is why Ervin says:

If we put a gun to a banker’s head and said “You know you’ve got the money, now give it up,” he would have to surrender. Now the question is: if we did the same thing to the government, using direct action means with an insurrectionary mass movement, would these not both be acts of expropriation? Or is it just to pacify the community why they gave us the money? One thing for sure, we definitely need the

money, and however we compel it from the government, is of less [importance] than the fact that we forced them to give it up to the people's forces at all. We would then use that money to rebuild our communities, maintain our organizations, and care for the needs of our people. (Ervin, 1993)

Efforts that win concessions are not **for** policy changes within this framework. However, as with any movement that is effective, policy changes will inevitably result from autonomous movements. Kadalie reminds us, "The policy of government is epiphenomenal, meaning it is always a response to something."

As the State scrambles to close the pockets of autonomy being opened up further by our movement on the ground, the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order will reform. The State will move to re-constitute itself by (re)asserting the terms of order and co-opting our efforts. But it can only project progress effectively through its game (the politics of appeal) and in its arena (recognition and negotiation).

Here, we know its game and arena, so we do not play nor formally enter. We know its function, so we engage it only to exploit that function; to deepen our communities' embrace of autonomous politics and to extract resources from the government. The State recognizes us only as 'threat', 'criminal', 'outlaw'. It cannot absorb these. So when it cannot effectively suppress them either, it must concede.

In this all, the State's capacity to maintain order is the target being confronted — from many different angles and in many different ways — while our capacities to instrumentalize disorder toward our revolutionary ends are developed further. To take autonomous politics as a basis of liberation struggle, then, requires us to infuse the often referenced framework of "survival pending revolution" with an insurrectionary element through our antagonistic posture toward the State and rejection of statism. It means taking 'expropriation toward perfect disorder' as a strategic logic guiding movement tactics just as much as military tactics.

The politics of autonomy push us to fully embrace revolution. To develop independent means of communal survival, struggle, and sustenance across our communities — outside and against the State. To build a revolutionary culture through this process. To allow our antagonism with the State and ruling classes to shape our objectives and inform every action we take (aboveground and underground). To divest from hierarchical power and the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order, as best we can, right now; and to struggle toward refusing the terms of order in a total, all-encompassing. way in doing so.

Toward Revolution

We know, as Franz Fanon tells us in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it." The precise mission we have will never be immediately apparent to us. But we can orient ourselves toward the most just end we can conceive of and that we know is necessary: Liberation.

We can define that end, analyze our terrain, and set boundaries concerning how we navigate that terrain to achieve our end. We can reject means — whether theoretical or methodological — that prove to not correspond with our ends, as well as the philosophies informing those means and politics shaping them.

States are not vehicles of liberation, nor are they revolutionary instruments, quite the opposite. Statism is a philosophy to be rejected in our revolutionary politics and praxes. These realities have been proven time and again. They have become increasingly evident on u.s. occupied Turtle Island since the post-1960s counterrevolution. The development of Black anarchism in the wake of the Black Power era — articulated first from within the belly (prisons) of the u.s. settler empire, by our revolutionary elders and ancestors who faced the brunt of fascist america's repression — is but one major testament to this.

Fascism speaks the language of reform.

In our historic moment, what Nsambu Za Suekama terms the “Third Upheaval” in *To the Ones Who Can Fly*, the stakes are as high as ever and fascism is in an even more advanced form. The writing is on the wall:

It will be anarchy (no more hierarchy) or annihilation (no more life on this planet)...
We must choose power from below because the liberation of Black folk, especially the disabled street queers, will only come when we abolish the world capitalist-colonial system and replace it with a society structured around our needs and our autonomy.
(Suekama, 2021)

The antagonism between us (the people) and the State, insofar as we lean into it, can forge our movements into revolutionary thrusts, swords piercing the heart of settler empire. It can sharpen our struggles collectively into a weapon capable of dealing the patriarchal-colonial-capitalist order a death blow; as George Jackson phrases it, “A blade at the throat of fascism.”

This is not an unprecedented potentiality, nor an adventurist posture, nor an idealist dream. Whether progressives presently holding to statism decide to be real or stay ignorant about all this is on them.

Fascism speaks the language of reform and its tongue will testify against it. Where we move uncompromisingly to further our autonomy — which necessitates decolonization and abolition — the story of State predominance moves toward its end. Its closing pages written by indomitable people, rebellious locales, disorderly regions. All moving on their own terms and coalescing in the global emergence of anarchy.

Our liberation will be struggled toward until its won. The point of autonomous politics, of anarchic radicalism, is for us to seize our own power, put **these** magic hands to use in our struggles, and not let that power or those hands keep being co-opted toward the ends of things depriving and aggressing against us at present.

It's about becoming ungovernable in that sense. Self-determining in that sense. It's **“All power to the people!”**, in that sense.

Some book recs

A Soldier's Story (Kuwasi Balagoon)

As Black as Resistance (Zoé Samudzi & William C. Anderson)

Black Anarchism: A Reader (Black Rose Anarchist Federation)

Black Autonomy Reader (Mutt)
Blood In My Eye (George Jackson)
Pan-African Social Ecology (Modibo Kadalie)

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